

The Temperance Movement in Tennessee

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What influenced the Temperance Movement in Tennessee and how did Tennesseans react to the movement?

From its earliest existence as a territory of North Carolina, Tennessee has struggled with regulating the sale and consumption of alcohol. A 1779 law sought to keep alcohol consumption at home or in inns that had been licensed by the county court. Alcohol consumption was a fact of life in the nineteenth century. Politicians even distributed liquor on election day as a way to sway voters. Throughout the early 1800s Tennessee's laws regarding alcohol vacillated between strict restriction and a licensing system that allowed almost anyone who paid a fee to be able to sell alcohol. The more restrictive laws resulted from the efforts of a number of temperance societies sprang up in Tennessee prior to the Civil War. During the war and immediate post war period the temperance movement waned as Tennesseans were occupied with more pressing matters. Temperance forces won an important victory in 1877 with the passage of the so called "Four Mile" law which made it illegal to sell alcohol within four miles of an incorporated school. Since there were hundreds of schools throughout the state, the effects of the law in rural areas were far reaching. However, the law had several exceptions including an exemption for alcohol sales in incorporated towns. As a result many rural areas became "dry" while alcohol continued to flow in the towns and cities.

In the 1880s, the temperance movement was rejuvenated with the appearance of a travelling minister named Sam Jones. Jones preached numerous "hellfire and damnation" revivals throughout the state. Jones encouraged his flock to take action in the world as part of their faith and praised the efforts of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Increasingly, ministers and their congregations viewed saloons as ground zero for all sorts of sinful behavior and resulting increased their efforts to close the saloons. The temperance movement, which had originally supported moderation in alcohol consumption shifted towards complete prohibition of alcohol.

By 1887, the Temperance Alliance had elected a number of politicians favorable to their cause and pushed for a constitutional amendment to ban all alcohol in the state. Despite widespread support, especially in East Tennessee, the amendment failed to pass. Some prohibition leaders attributed the failure of the amendment to the fact that women did not have the right to vote. Indeed, there was an important overlap between the temperance and women's suffrage movements as many women active in the temperance movement came to believe that would not be able to stop alcohol consumption until they had the right to vote. Other leaders blamed the failure of the amendment on African American voters in urban areas. City leaders often

cultivated the support of the African American community by offering them better schools, jobs and parks in return for their votes. As a result of the prohibition amendment's failure, some Temperance leaders supported restrictions on African American voting rights passed by the General Assembly in 1889 and 1890. After the defeat of the prohibition amendment, prohibition leaders decided to take a county by county approach. By 1907, liquor was illegal in the entire state except for Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga and Lafollete. However, alcohol was still readily available from moonshiners and in illegal bars called "blind tigers."

In 1896, Edward Carmack entered the arena of state politics. Eventually, he would become a martyr of the prohibition movement and bring down the power of the Bourbon Democrats who had controlled Tennessee's government for decades. Carmack got his start as a newspaperman working for the pro Bourbon newspapers in Memphis and Nashville. Carmack was known for his vicious personal attacks on his political opponents. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1896, Carmack showed himself to be a loyal Bourbon by supporting limited government and white supremacy. In fact, Carmack's virulent racism was extreme even by the standards of this time. For example, he once proposed repealing the Fifteenth Amendment. In 1901, Carmack was selected as one of Tennessee's senators. After losing his Senate seat to Robert Taylor in 1906, Carmack seized on prohibition as the issue that would propel him back into politics.

Despite having no record as a proponent of prohibition, Carmack became the leader of the prohibition movement. He became editor of the *Nashville Tennessean* and used the paper to attack his political rivals especially, Colonel Duncan Cooper. Cooper had once been a political ally of Carmack, but now he threatened Carmack and both men began to carry guns. In November of 1908, Carmack, Cooper and his son Robin accidentally meet on a Nashville street. The elder Cooper charged at Carmack who fired two shots that hit Robin Cooper. Robin then pulled his gun and killed Carmack. Despite being a late supporter of prohibition, Carmack was turned into a martyr for the cause by Luke Lea and others. They charged that Carmack had been murdered by the liquor forces and used the public outcry to push a statewide prohibition amendment through the General Assembly in 1909. The Coopers were convicted of second degree murder but Robin's conviction was overturned on a technicality by the state supreme court in 1910 and Duncan Cooper was pardoned by the governor.

The victory of the prohibition movement was tempered by the refusal of leaders in Memphis, Nashville and Chattanooga to enforce the law. Memphis mayor Ed Crump was the most defiant in refusing to enforce the law. Eventually, the General Assembly passed the "Ouster Law" which allowed the state to remove from office elected officials who refused to enforce prohibition. Crump was ousted, won reelection and then resigned in favor of a friend on the city commission. Crump who technically served as a city trustee ran Memphis through a series of puppet mayors. In 1917, even tougher laws were passed which closed saloons in the cities. The

passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 brought an end to prohibition as a political issue in Tennessee politics. Even when the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed by the Twenty-First Amendment, most of Tennessee's counties remained officially dry, though illegal alcohol production and consumption continued. Only in recent years have many cities and counties lifted restrictions on alcohol consumption often citing the need for tax revenue from alcohol sales as the reason for the change.

Sources:

Leab, Grace. "Tennessee Temperance Activities, 1870-1899." *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 21 (1949): 52-68.

Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith. *Tennesseans and Their History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

Student Activity

Answer the question below using information in the content essay

1. What was the “Four Mile” law and why was it significant? _____

2. How did Sam Jones influence the temperance movement? _____

3. What factors did Temperance leaders blame for the failure of the prohibition amendment in 1887? _____

4. What role did Edward Carmack play in Tennessee’s prohibition movement?

5. Why was the “Ouster Law” necessary and what role did it play in Tennessee politics? _____
